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Sorcery and Speculation: On Deceit and Dignity in the Economy

Stuart Patrick Chalmers 

Institute of European Studies and Human Rights, the Pontifical University of Salamanca, 37002 Salamanca, Spain; spchalmers@upsa.es

Abstract

In combination with recent Catholic social teaching, this paper will explore the thought of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas on the role of ethics in the economy to challenge forms of aggressive profiteering by illusion, deceit or exploitation. Levinas draws upon the Talmud and its teaching on sorcery and on profiting from falsehood as a starting point for his reflections on modern society, reckless market speculation and on the need for the members of society to grow in their mutual responsibility and respect for each other's unique and incomparable dignity. Levinas's ethic of generosity calls us to move away from the self-interested model of "greed is good" and to strive for ever-greater justice in our monetary society.

Keywords: deceit; dignity; economy; ethics; fraternity; illusion; justice; Levinas; love; market; Pope Benedict XVI; Pope Francis

1. Introduction

The subject of this paper is ethics in business and the economy, but my point of departure might seem a bit strange, as it refers to sorcery. My starting point is a peculiar passage in the writings of Emmanuel Levinas, a contemporary philosopher who was a favourite of St John Paul II, and who met with him on several occasions ([Zimmermann 2015](#), p. 65).

Emmanuel Levinas was a highly influential philosopher in the late twentieth century, and his complex thought is now being applied to a broad range of fields, including business ethics. Levinas was born in Lithuania into a Jewish family, but he later settled in France to pursue his philosophical studies. His Jewish heritage led him to explore the writings of the Talmud, which was the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law for centuries. Compiled in the fifth century AD, the Talmud is a huge collection of teachings from over the centuries on how to live the Torah. The sayings range widely from theology to ethics, from customs to folklore, and from history to business practice ([Kahaner 2003](#)). The curious passage from the Talmud quoted by Levinas is as follows:

The sorcerer, if he performs an act, is subject to penalties, but not if he merely creates illusions. Rabbi Akiba... has said: Two people pick cucumbers: one of them is subject to penalties, the other is exempt; the one who performs the act is subject to penalties, the one that gives the illusion of it is exempt ([Levinas 2019](#), p. 213).

Levinas applies this enigmatic passage on the pardon or punishment of sorcery to his concern for human dignity in the free-market economy. How does he manage to do this?



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He does so by defining much of modern society in terms of dissimulation, declaring the essential flaws of the modern economy to be deceit and illusion, which in the past were also identified with sorcery. Thus, Levinas uses these terms to describe the separation from reality which he considers to be prevalent in modern culture (Levinas 2019, p. 213).

Levinas explores the difference between creating an illusion and profiting from illusion, which, in terms of the Talmudic commentary, is the difference between conjuring up the pretence of a field of cucumbers and selling the imaginary crop. Levinas concludes that “if the illusion manages to fit itself within an economic process. . . [then] sorcery becomes a criminal act (Levinas 2019, p. 200). The deceit is not just a trick, which has “dazzled the eyes” (Rodkinson et al. 1918, Babylonian Talmud, XV, 7, Tract Sanhedrin, Mishna 14); it is an act of fraud.

All this talk of cucumbers and conjuring might sound rather peculiar, but it provides a stimulus for Levinas to comment on the flaws of the speculative market and its assault on human dignity. Thus, Levinas states, “modern economic life is, after all, the place of preference for the harvesting of illusory cucumbers and for the heavy profits attached to such a harvest” (Levinas 2019, p. 200). The accusation is that illusion is used in the modern economy as a means to maximise profit, and that this approach to business undermines human dignity. Zygmunt Bauman would agree with Levinas’s view, pointing to underlying deceptions that are built into the fabric of the consumer society. I would summarise these deceptions as the illusion of need and the illusion of choice. Bauman observes that people are “groomed” to gain the habits of consumerism through the manipulation of desire and by linking consumption to happiness, identity, success and status (Bauman 2005, pp. 25–26, 79, 112, 123). The desire to keep buying is fuelled by the illusion of need, as consumers are “seduced” into thinking that the ephemeral is essential; a “must” (Bauman 2005, pp. 26, 79). Consumption is also sustained by the “promise . . . of choice,” which Bauman calls an “illusion,” given that “the choice on offer is not itself a matter of consumer choice,” but rather “dictated by unchosen, unelected managers—global companies which come ever closer to monopolistic rule over consumer markets” (Bauman 2005, p. 124). Thus, “the consumer market seduces its customers” (Bauman 2005, p. 26) and in doing so, according to Levinas, a “corruption” of commerce occurs, where the other is “betrayed” by the manipulative “seduction,” and “violence” is done to the dignity and the will of the other (Levinas 1969, p. 229).

Let us therefore explore the question of illusion in the economy and how respect for our inherent human dignity is affected by it. I will refer to Levinas throughout this paper, but I will also compare his views with the social teaching of Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis in particular, as well as the Vatican document *Dignitas Infinita*, which singled out Levinas for his efforts in highlighting the importance of the relational quality of the human person in connection to ethical responsibility (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2024, no. 13, fn. 24).

2. The Economy and Its Goals

Before we explore areas of illusion and dysfunction in the economy, we should underline the fundamental importance of the economy in society and point out that trade and business are essential to communities, so that people are able to thrive. As such, we must take care not to confuse the criticism of excesses or flaws in an economy with an attack on the notion of economy itself. In this vein, Pope Benedict XVI affirmed:

The Church has always held that economic action is not to be regarded as something opposed to society. . . . [Yet], Admittedly, the market can be a negative force, not because it is so by nature, but because a certain ideology can make it so. It must be remembered that the market does not exist in the pure state. It is shaped

by the cultural configurations which define it and give it direction. Economy and finance, as instruments, can be used badly when those at the helm are motivated by purely selfish ends (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 36).

Thus, the idea of economic activity as such is certainly not a problem from the perspective of Christian ethics (Camacho et al. 2006, p. 129). Similarly, while pointing out the moral “ambiguity” of money (Levinas 2006a, p. 32; 2007, p. 203), Levinas also highlights its “positive function,” not only in the exchange of goods and services (Burggraeve 1997, p. 37; Levinas 2007, p. 203), but also as a means of “disinterested,” selfless care of the other (Levinas 2007, p. 205). Therefore, the problem is not so much to do with the economy per se, but with its distortion, when it becomes an instrument that harms people instead of helping them. Pope Benedict XVI points out that this distortion occurs when the selfishness in human nature is accentuated and institutionalised by an ideology that restricts our vision of society and of human beings (Benedict XVI 2009, no.34). Thus, if the model of social structures is fundamentally selfish, the economy will also serve a selfish end. Unfortunately, from its inception in the writings of Adam Smith, the model underpinning the modern economy has an inherently selfish motivation. Let us look at Smith’s view of the economy for a moment.

Adam Smith’s landmark definition of the free-market economy, as presented in *The Wealth of Nations*, is fundamentally self-centred and individualistic in its motivation (Cavanaugh 2008, p. 2; Rothbard 2006, pp. 213, 92). Thus, Smith writes:

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. Nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens (Smith [1776] 2012, I, 2).

Beyond our natural propensity to self-preservation, Smith acknowledged the evident reality of a basic concupiscence or selfishness in humans, which diminishes and distracts the desire to help others. Smith did recognise that we do help each other, but he thought that this sentiment is often defeated by our own self-interest (Smith [1759] 1976, p. 86; Cavanaugh 2008, p. 92). However, he thought that the “invisible hand” of the economy would make up for the lack of solidarity in a community, giving everyone what they need (Smith [1776] 2012, IV, 2). In this way, a self-interested illusion is propagated that “egoism is altruism” (Harari 2014, p. 348).

We might say that Smith’s concept of the benign, invisible hand is analogous to the religious concept of Divine Providence. As such, Smith’s model is subtly shifting society from “In God we Trust” to “In Money we Trust” (cf. Luke 16:13), to a blind trust in the notion of a self-correcting market and in its supposed benefits (Stiglitz 2024, p. 134; Rothbard 2006, p. 249; Cox 2016, pp. 7, 17). This shift in trust to the power of money becomes ever-starker over time to the point that with the advent of contemporary neoliberalism, self-interest is no longer simply understood as the foundation of the functioning of the free market. Now, “self-interest and competition [are seen] as end-values in themselves” (Rhodes 2020, pp. 8–9; Gilbert 2013, p. 9). Now, “greed is good” (Collier 2019, p. 26; Harari 2014, p. 348; Camacho et al. 2006, pp. 278–79). Here, the human person is in danger of being ensnared by an ideology, as the notion of *homo economicus* becomes an all-encompassing framework for interpreting the world and for acting in it (Brown 2015, pp. 31, 35; Collier 2024, p. 222; Francis 2013, no. 55–57).

The American theologian William Cavanaugh considers that this attitudinal shift indicates a transfer of the neoliberal free-market concept of freedom to all areas of human action, thus reducing moral choice to an arbitrary battle of wills (Cavanaugh 2008, pp. 2, 16),

since, in neoliberalism, freedom is understood largely in negative terms, as a freedom from interference (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2024, no. 31). In this way, society becomes more and more a mere aggregate of self-absorbed individuals (“Social Ontology: History”; Levinas 1996, pp. 51–52) and a “balance of egoisms” (Pinckaers 1996, p. 370) rather than a community of people, as self-interest is understood as the primary driver of choice and action. For this reason, Levinas describes this society of a “totality of egos” as “essentially economic,” since it is only held together insofar as it is of mutual benefit (Levinas 1987c, p. 39). And so, we can see that as our concept of the human person changes, so our vision of society also changes. Man becomes the consumer (Bauman 2005, p. 22) or even the wolf (Hobbes 1991, p. 89; Burggraeve 2007, p. 85), and society becomes a hostile environment of individuals largely held together by what can be gained from using each other (Burggraeve 2007, p. 85). *Little Red Riding Hood* becomes *The Wolf of Wall Street*, and solidarity and morality are left behind (Collier 2024, p. 222). It is a merciless concept of society, in line with Hobbes’s concept (Hobbes 2017, pp. 104, 494, 598; Levinas 2006a, pp. 87, 90; Levinas 1998b, pp. 4–5; Burggraeve 2020, p. 443), which Catholic social teaching seeks to challenge. Thus, quoting the words of Pope Francis, *Dignitas infinita* highlights that societies primarily driven by “market freedom and efficiency” deprive the poor, the disabled and the marginalised from exercising their freedom (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2024, no. 31; Francis 2020, no. 109). In other words, a selfish concept of freedom denies the freedom of others.

3. Levinas on Selfishness

Having briefly examined Smith’s view of the human person and its later implications, let us now turn our attention to Levinas’s understanding of the human being and action. The starting point for Levinas’s analysis of the human person is the endeavour to persist in being and a fundamental selfishness. He sums this up with two terms: *conatus essendi*, from Spinoza (Levinas 1999, p. 97; Aasland 2009, p. 64; de Spinoza 2018, p. 100), and “the egoism of life” (Levinas 1969, p. 113). So, like Adam Smith, Levinas acknowledges a natural tendency for self-preservation and self-interest, one which brings a certain happiness. In this selfish context, Levinas describes the initial encounter with the other as a “disturbance” to my world (Levinas 1996, p. 65). In a desire to maintain selfish contentedness, I might choose to absorb the other rather than help or serve the other. In this case, the other is brought into my world and becomes part of me as something useful, and his or her radical difference from me is lost. Here, the other is consumed, used or exploited for my benefit, my enjoyment or happiness (Levinas 1969, p. 113), and the individual dignity of the other is ignored. The other becomes part of me as “the same” (Levinas 1969, p. 111), and by “living from” (Levinas 1969, pp. 112, 110) or feeding on what the other offers, my identity and my sovereignty are reaffirmed (cf. Davis 2007, p. 43). But the satisfaction of this “withdrawal into oneself” is paradoxical, says Levinas, in that the pleasurable moment of “self-sufficiency” cannot be maintained (Levinas 1969, p. 118). This is because the desire for a self-enclosed, self-absorbed contentedness is accompanied by an “incessant restlessness,” which is revealed through the “proximity” of the other (Levinas 1998b, pp. 82, 75, 80), who bears the “trace of the infinite” (Levinas 1999, pp. 105–6; Levinas 1982, p. 101). It is this restless, “insatiable” desire for the infinite (Levinas 1982, pp. 101, 86; Levinas 2006b, pp. 30, 33) and our sense of responsibility before the other (Levinas 1999, p. 105; Levinas 1969, p. 248) which prompts us to escape selfishness through transcendence and service of the other (Levinas 1986, p. 139; Levinas 1978, p. 96; Levinas 1969, pp. 147–48; Levinas 1999, p. 109). Therefore, Levinas sees the process of recognising one’s responsibility before the other as a journey of redemption (cf. Levinas 1978, pp. 85–86, 91–92; Bloechl 2022, pp. 41, 101, 122–23, 158), which leads to a moral adulthood of justice and solidarity; to a

fully human life of sociality (Levinas 1999, p. 103), in which we leave behind a childish focus on our own needs (cf. Levinas 1976, pp. 27, 37–38, 40; Morgan 2011, p. 67).

However, this maturation can be resisted or disrupted. In this case, a violence continues to be done to the other by ignoring the person as subject and seeing only his or her utility (Levinas 1987b, p. 19; Morgan 2011, p. 84). Levinas reminds us that, while I can resist the call to responsibility coming from the other, I cannot avoid responding to the other, since all forms of reaction are a response, even that of choosing to ignore the person. My response to encountering the other necessarily involves my freedom and free choice, and so, my response to the other, whether it be selfish or made in mature solidarity, will be determined by my freedom (Levinas 1969, p. 150; Aasland 2009, p. 69; Mensch 2015, pp. 92–94). This implies that the key difference between Smith’s view and that of Levinas is that Levinas understands that the individual and society can grow beyond selfishness, and this is crucial for our understanding of our interpersonal relationships in all fields, including business and the economy.

4. The Economy and Illusion

Levinas’s general analysis of selfishness and the potential for growth leads us back to his comments on the economy and illusion. We have already seen that Levinas considers the speculative market to be the place of chasing after “heavy profits” from the sale of “illusory cucumbers” (Levinas 2019, p. 200) or, in other words, that one can make a large profit from as yet non-existent commodities. The imaginary future stock can become the cause of a buying and selling frenzy, perhaps through increased speculation spurred on by news of a possible shortage, and profit is obtained from the illusion, just before the bubble of the illusion bursts (Ansotegui et al. 2014, pp. 134–35, 301). In fact, Levinas describes such an illusion as “bubbles of Nothing” mixed through the reality of things (Levinas 2019, p. 199). How do the bubbles develop? Through human action. Levinas distinguishes between types of human action or “rational technique” (Levinas 2019, p. 209). There are techniques which serve human ends, which allow the person to flourish and develop, and to do so in communion with others (cf. Benedict XVI 2009, no. 11). However, Levinas says there is another type of technique, which is to create illusion, to make nothing appear to be something (Levinas 2019, pp. 208–9), and then to sell that illusion. This skill, he says, is detached from good human ends and focuses solely upon self-interest and on high financial gain. Such a detachment from fundamental human goods and ends is morally destructive, in such a way that even the one who makes a profit through the fiction becomes poorer by it. Moreover, instead of searching for sustainable long-term growth in solidarity (cf. Benedict XVI 2009, nos. 21, 25, 32), the individualistic thirst for quick profits can lead to a reckless approach to market volatility, so that the money gained can also be rapidly lost (cf. Benedict XVI 2009, no. 40; Ansotegui et al. 2014, p. 144). Pope Benedict comes to a similar conclusion when he writes:

Once profit becomes the exclusive goal, if it is produced by improper means and without the common good as its ultimate end, it risks destroying wealth and creating poverty (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 21).

Levinas’s description of profit by illusion is an example of what Pope Benedict calls “improper means,” that is, economics or business without ethics. It is material gain by falsehood that lacks solidarity with others. Such selfish dishonesty might employ a variety of illusions and forms of deceit to make a bigger profit, such as overvaluing assets, undercutting a producer or supplier, or abusing someone’s trust by placing their funds at grave risk for personal gain (Camacho et al. 2006, pp. 206–12; Ansotegui et al. 2014, pp. 128–29). In whatever form it takes, it is the distance between the self and others that allows the exploitation to take place, since a wall of selfishness blocks the view and justifies

the dishonest behaviour. Emmanuel Levinas considers such selfishness to be not only a separation from others, but more fundamentally a separation from God.

Levinas believes that man is called to be vigilant against falsehood and evil, and to avoid being caught up by their delusory attraction as an easy solution to one's problems (Levinas 2019, p. 210). That vigilance is practised in God's light. When we shut out that light, we create the illusion of another reality where we make the rules and justify the unjustifiable, "including crime" (Levinas 2019, p. 210). In those moments of darkness, "[i]t is not God who withdraws from the world," he states. "It is man who closes himself to God." (Levinas 2019, p. 208). Thus, the wall of selfishness blocks our view of God and his ways, and creates an impression that we are in charge and above all reproach (cf. Benedict XVI 2009, no. 68; Levinas 1990, p. 17).

What is the price of this economics without ethics, of this selfish profiting from illusion and exploitation? We must remember that "economic dysfunctions always involve human costs" (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 32), so when we look at the effect of the major cases around the world, we begin to realise that selling an illusion is not only exploitative, but can also be deadly (Francis 2013, no. 53), sometimes on a vast scale. Take, for example, the drastic effects of aggressive mineral mining, logging or deforestation for cash-crop farming. The land is scarred, the people are poisoned or left homeless, and are intimidated or even murdered if they protest (Pelaez-Fernandez 2024). Other examples of seeking huge profits from illusion or deceit include the falsification of emission reports by Volkswagen and Audi (Hotten 2015); Ponzi schemes by fraudsters such as Bernie Madoff, who defrauded \$64 billion of investors' money (Office of Public Affairs of the US Department of Justice 2023); the reckless profiteering from the sale of high-interest subprime loans to the poor, which contributed to the evolution of the 2008 financial crisis (Reiss 2013, p. 19); the sale of faulty accounting software to the UK Post Office, and the persistent denial of its flaws by Fujitsu and the UK Government, which led to 900 sub-postmasters being wrongly prosecuted for theft, and resulting in bankruptcy, prison sentences and even cases of suicide (BBC News 2024). Similarly, Boeing's philosophy of prioritising profitability and stock share price over passenger safety led to decades of cost-cutting, which ultimately led to the 737 disasters in 2018, in which three hundred and forty-six people died in planes that were known by Boeing to be seriously faulty (Blakeley 2024, pp. 19–23). Meanwhile, between 2010 and 2020, "Boeing distributed \$24.6 billion dollars in dividends to shareholders—many of whom were executives within the company" (Blakeley 2024, p. 21). Lastly, one should mention the aggressive marketing of opioids by drug companies in the United States. Billions of dollars have been garnered by these companies by bribing and pressuring doctors to write long-term prescriptions of high doses of fentanyl for patients who should never have been offered it. The search for profit through greed, corruption and deceit has created an addiction crisis on a monumental scale, resulting in 645,000 deaths so far (Federal Communications Commission 2024), with an estimated further loss of 1.22 million lives in the US by 2032 (White 2022).

Therefore, "economic dysfunctions always involve human costs" (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 32). But why should we care? If my focus is purely on profit, I will remain "self-obsessed," (IBJ Research Bureau 2024, p. 28), blind to the broader implications of my actions in business, and unrepentant for the damage or deceit caused to those who have been the casualties of sharp business practice or exaggerated marketing to boost sales. Approaching human situations from an aggressive "Wertfrei" or "value-free" economic perspective (Rothbard 2006, p. 245; Sandel 2013, p. 88) narrows our focus and atomises our understanding of reality, isolating the mathematical model from its human and moral impact (Lawson 2019, p. 6). In this way, the human consequences of a profitable cost-cutting exercise, such as the loss of local unemployment through outsourcing to low-wage

countries (Stiglitz 2016, p. 399; Benedict XVI 2009, no. 40), remain, inappropriately, on the periphery of the computation of costs and benefits (Conill Sancho 2017, pp. 234–35).

Some neo-liberal economists, such as Milton Friedman or the 2024 Nobel Prize winners Daron Acemoglu, James Robinson and Simon Johnson, have included the human component in their economics, but their analysis of human welfare is still in terms of productivity and economic growth (Friedman [1962] 2020, pp. 120–21; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, p. 444; Greeley 2024, p. 19). Yet, is it enough to care about people's welfare simply because it is more profitable for me in the long term? Similarly, if fear of penalties, loss of productivity or loss of reputation are my only reasons for pursuing ethical investment or ethical business practice, my ethics are still based upon self-interest, and if that is the case, my business ethics are little more than “cosmetics” (Cortina 2013, p. 31): just a thin veneer of goodness. In that case, I will continue to treat the human person as a commodity (John Paul II 1991, no. 4; Burggraef 2007, p. 132), or as mere collateral damage in the process of production and consumption, perhaps measuring human impact in terms of the impersonal euphemism of “negative externalities” (Dewilde 2020, p. 270). But, is there a deeper reason why I should care about others in business, rather than treating them as “economic objects” (Han 2018, p. 68), by exploiting, deceiving or depersonalising them? Levinas says that “ethics is an optic” (Levinas 1976, p. 37; 1990, p. 17), that is, a way of seeing which provides the basis for action. If narrow “economism” (John Paul II 1981, no. 7) obstructs clear vision and greed creates a “short-sightedness” which blurs reality (Ansotegui et al. 2014, p. 144), what will help me to see other people clearly so that I will be able to recognise their dignity and treat them with the truth, justice and respect they deserve? What will break the illusory self-deception propagated by aggressive capitalism that other people largely exist to serve our needs?

5. Why Care?—Justice and the Economy

Levinas's answer is more radical than simply correcting our vision. He says we need to wake up (Levinas 2006a, pp. 66–67). We need to open our eyes and ears, awake from our self-focused slumber (Levinas 2006a, p. 74), and become truly aware of our surroundings and of the people around us, so that once more we can “consider life from the perspective of the other, . . . and to afford the other an ethical precedence” (Han 2018, p. 89). Prejudice, fear, ideology, self-obsession and indifference all stop us from truly being alert and connected to our surroundings. Levinas says that this “waking up” or “sobering up” to the reality of the other “ceaselessly puts the priority of same [that is, of the self] into question” (Levinas 2006a, p. 75), and in this way, we can begin to interact with others in the manner they deserve. Therefore, for Levinas, waking up from the contented “stupefaction” of self-obsession is the essence of “Ethics” (Levinas 2006a, p. 76), and the focal point for this awakening for Levinas is the Face of the other (Levinas 2006a, p. 74).

Looking at the face of the other is the opposite of anonymity. Anonymity provides a distance between the self and others, which can reduce inhibition and increase our focus on the self. We can see this lack of inhibition in the aggressive, suggestive and emotionally destructive messages that populate social media (Sacks 2020, pp. 213–14). The distance of anonymity infantilises or paralyses moral reflection, since the reality of the other is reduced to a number, to an avatar on a website or to an unseen irrelevance in the pursuit of my own goals. The moral disengagement of anonymity has shown itself time and time again in history, most notably in the atrocities of war (Arendt 2022, p. 231; Levi 1996, p. 56), but anonymity also affects our moral responsibility in the fundamental institutions of society. Here, the other is in danger of being treated as an anonymous figure in the vast social structure and by its “separation” from people (Levinas 1969, p. 175), the institution also becomes “faceless” and unaccountable in its anonymity (Bauman and Donskis 2013, p. 184;

Levinas 1969, p. 175). Levinas is pointing out the injustice and exploitation that lies in social institutions, including the economy, where the person is reduced to a role, so that “a who” becomes “a what” (Levinas 1969, p. 177; Large 2015, p.75), and is lumped into “an economic totality” (Levinas 2007, p. 205), where the use of money anonymises the exchange between people (Burggraefe 2007, pp. 131–32; Burggraefe 1997, p. 16; Levinas 2007, p. 205). Levinas concludes that in commerce and war, “the other is not approached face to face” (Levinas 1969, p. 228). Rather, in “the gold that buys him or the steel that kills him, . . . commerce aims at the anonymous market and war is waged against a mass” (Levinas 1969, pp. 228–29).

Therefore, Levinas would challenge us in our social interactions and institutions to push against the injustices that are born of anonymity, and to “enter into the straightforwardness of the face to face” (Levinas 1969, pp. 228–29) with a responsibility to the other that comes from this type of interaction. In talking of the face, one should remember that the word is not always to be taken literally. Indeed, the word “face” is also a synecdoche, pointing to the reality of the whole person (Levinas 2006a, p. 201). As a result, for Levinas, a hand sculpted by Rodin is as evocative of the uniqueness, vulnerable nakedness and mortality of the person, as the face (Levinas 1987a, p. 32). This also implies that the “face to face” interaction he proposes is a model of alert, ethical encounter that is not only to be understood on the level of individuals, but is to be extended, as far as possible, to the larger scale of the institution (Levinas 1969, p. 214).

Levinas says that the motivation for treating others with justice and honesty in business is rooted in the “unique” and “incomparable” dignity that each person bears (Levinas 2007, p. 206). The face of each person “arouses” the self’s goodness, through its plea and command (Levinas 1969, p. 200, 213, 247; Morgan 2011, p. 10). Therefore, it is essential that we wake up to the dignity of the other so we can hear that command and respond generously in “mercy and charity to [our] neighbour” (Levinas 2007, p. 206), so we can respond in “holiness” (Levinas 2007, p. 205; Levinas 1999, p. 180). Some scholars would downplay Levinas’s religious language by understanding it simply as a way of describing the infinite (Zimmermann 2015, pp. 151, 162; Wright 1999, pp. 71–80) and by concluding that “there is nothing behind the face” (Morgan 2011, p. 147). However, this would not do justice to the complex and evolving thought of Levinas as a whole, which draws heavily on Hebrew Scripture (Moyn 2005, pp. 194, 254). It would also remove the basis of his understanding of human altruism, which he sees ultimately as the Word of God revealed in the face of the other (Levinas 2006a, pp. 94, 112–13; 1969, pp. 77, 293; 1998b, pp. 12, 162; 1990, p. 18). Thus, Levinas declares, “through my relation to the other I am in touch with God” (Levinas 1990, p. 17) and so, even in the earliest affective stirrings (Levinas 1996, p. 157; 1999, p. 104) of one’s “altruistic instincts, . . . God has already spoken” (Levinas 1999, p. 180).

Therefore, we should take the unique dignity of the other seriously. It is a dignity of alterity which points to the other as neighbour (Levinas 1998b, p. 157; Morrison 2013, p. 43), as brother or sister in all their “asymmetric” difference from me (Levinas 1969, p. 214; Levinas 1978, p. 96), as an “epiphany” of the Word of God (Levinas 1969, p. 197; Levinas 1999, p. 104) and as created in God’s image and likeness (Levinas 1998a, p. 148). It is a dignity that calls for a response on our part that is forgetful of self (Levinas 1998b, p. 115). But how does a morality of disinterested generosity (Levinas 1999, p. 108–9) fit with the goals of business and economics or with the competing needs of people in society? How does such an ethical obligation of “gratuitousness” connect with economic activity and the management of scarcity (Levinas 1999, p. 101; Hayek 1980, p. 68)? Levinas says that the act of mercy and charity towards the other “requires from the executant an investment at a loss” (Levinas 2006b, p. 28). Yet, if my being and action are focused on the other to

such an extent that my generosity comes at a cost to me, surely this is bad business? Or is it? This makes us ask what the essence of good business really is. If good business is not actually equal to the highest achievable profit, but is understood as operating within an ethical framework of justice and the common good, then good business will “favour human beings,” rather than neglect or exploit them (Francis 2013, no. 58). The current Prime Minister of Canada and former Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, sums this up as “purpose must be accompanied by profit” (Carney 2021, p. 319). The words and the word order are striking. Profit is not placed first, meaning that it is made while pursuing the purpose of the business, and that purpose, according to Carney, is benevolence, not profit. This “virtuous circle of governance” (Carney 2021, p. 208) is the opposite of Adam Smith’s view that we examined earlier. Therefore, Carney writes, “business leaders must keep their businesses going while they are benevolent” (Carney 2021, p. 319). Similarly, in the powerful words of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis also says that the economy should have a “truly human purpose” of “generous solidarity,” where money serves rather than rules (Francis 2013, nos. 55, 58). Grounding economics, therefore, in an ethics of virtue rather than a self-serving pragmatism ensures that people are placed before profit (cf. Chomsky 1999, p. 26). Such an ethical grounding also encourages the recognition of altruism as rational behaviour in business (Reiss 2013, p. 283), rather than as some kind of weak aberration or “meaningless conception” (Hayek 2011, pp. 140–41; Levinas 1998b, p. 116).

These comments on benevolence bring business and solidarity together, but what about the issue of scarcity and competing needs? Here Levinas points to the importance of justice in living as a community (Levinas 2006a, pp. 17–18; Burggraeve 2020, p. 447). As we have seen, Levinas encourages us to reach a mature morality of living for the Other, which is expressed in “an extravagance of . . . response” (Levinas 2006a, p. 189). However, such a depth of generosity cannot be perpetuated in the wider context of many people. Behind the first Other, there are other Others, who also deserve my attention. Moreover, I, too, am an Other, seeking solidarity from my neighbours. Yet, in the wider social context, while I can no longer focus all my effort on the needs of the single other, my response to each of my neighbours must still maintain its connection with charity and justice. In that sense, for Levinas and for Catholic Social teaching, treating someone fairly is understood to lie within the ambit of love rather than outside it (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1999, nos. 1929–33). Levinas’s analysis helps us to understand that justice is not opposed to charity, but fits within its embrace and oversight (Levinas 2006a, p. 92), since justice without love or mercy is *dura lex*—a cold, hard response to the other (Levinas 2006a, p. 198). An uncaring attitude towards justice opens the door to the possibility of widespread “oppression, exploitation, discrimination, deception, greed and selfishness on a huge scale,” since “many . . . exploitative actions are understood to be perfectly justified,” so long as they comply with the law (Rhodes 2020, p. 36).

Therefore, we need a vision of justice which includes mercy and solidarity, so that it is not reduced merely to a mean form of commutative, transactional justice (cf. Benedict XVI 2009, no. 35). Our vision of justice should also start with the other (Burggraeve 1997, p. 17), rather than the self, for that broader vision to develop. If it starts with the self, justice will shrink in its perspective. For example, one might point to the vision of justice proposed by David Hume, a fellow Scot who strongly influenced Adam Smith (Rasmussen 2017, pp. 161–62). Hume had a restricted vision of justice largely based upon the protection of one’s property (MacIntyre 1996, p. 298), since he saw benevolence lying outside justice and not as its “original motive” (Hume 2019, III, 2.1, III, 2.2; Reiss 2013, p. 267). As a result, he understood justice to be a necessary “remedy” (Hume 2019, III, 2.2) for the lack of altruism in society, since he did not recognise the existence of a natural inclination to “universal

love” in mankind (Hume 2019, III, 2.1). In contrast, for Levinas and Catholic social teaching, justice is not merely created artificially by society because altruism is lacking in humans. Rather, altruism is understood to be the motivation behind the justice, and consequently, the justice will be all the better, the more it reflects its merciful foundation, and the more people grow in practising mercy (Levinas 2006a, p. 199). Hume understood justice to be an artificial construct for the protection of private property and of one’s rights in the context of the fear of theft “by the violence of others” (Hume 2019, III, 2.2). On the other hand, the concept of justice for Levinas and Catholic social teaching is giving someone what is their due in the context of care rather than fear or suspicion. Where competing needs limit the personal or institutional response, the generosity of my reaction is necessarily curtailed (Levinas 1999, p. 102), but the underlying motivation of a care for the other ensures that the response is at least just. This “optic” or perspective of fairness rooted in the “order of love” is essential (Burggraeve 1997, pp. 5, 11, 65; Chalmers 2014, pp. 319–26), as it provides the scope for growth in a sense of community, rather than a deterioration towards a mere society of egos and factions, beleaguered by protectionist tribalism (Stiglitz 2016, p. 408). As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* declares:

No legislation could by itself do away with the fears, prejudices, and attitudes of pride and selfishness which obstruct the establishment of truly fraternal societies. Such behaviour will cease only through the charity that finds in every man a “neighbour,” a brother. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1999, no. 1931).

Nothing is perfect in this world, and all attempts to create a utopia have not only failed but have also left a trail of human devastation throughout history (cf. Hobsbawm 1995, pp. 566, 679, 805–7; Levinas 1999, pp. 106–7, 112; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, p. 389). However, this should not lead us to conclude that we cannot challenge social institutions to be more just and loving, since every political and economic system will always fall short of its origin and goal, namely, the responsible care for the created, transcendent dignity of every human person in society (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1999, no. 1929). To that extent, Levinas reminds us that the members of a society should be vigilant so that the institutions, such as the economy, politics and the judiciary, do not forget their fundamental ethical purpose by seeking to create some kind of closed, “definitive regime of the good” (Robbins 2002, p. 81; Levinas 1993, p. 123; Burggraeve 1997, p. 40), which in its blindness considers itself the sole arbiter of what is just and good (Robbins 2002, p. 81; Burggraeve 2019, p. 16).

Therefore, Levinas puts forward the ethical challenge of always seeking “a better justice” (*toujours une meilleure justice*) (Burggraeve 1997, pp. 38, 40, 75; Burggraeve 2020, p. 450), which strives to protect institutional justice “against its own harshness” and to grow in a loving responsibility for the other (Levinas 2006a, pp. 198–99). Levinas applies this challenge to the economy, too, so that the other is served with dignity and respected in all their “incomparable” uniqueness (Levinas 2007, p. 206). The call to search for better justice does not mean that Levinas thinks that society will always improve according to some kind of progressivist notion of history (Voegelin 1987, pp. 119–20). Rather, we should take Levinas’s words as a challenge for ongoing renewal and rebirth (Burggraeve 1997, pp. 23, 25, 27) to remember the human purpose of politics, business and the economy (Collier 2024, pp. 225, 236), so that our individual and corporate actions always remain “open” to the desire to do better (Levinas 2006a, p. 119), and to serve one another more truthfully in justice and mercy.

6. Conclusions

The economy has the potential to help or harm, to enable or to exploit, according to the ethical perspective behind it. As a result, for Levinas, gold can be “an instrument of guile”

that “compels and tempts,” (Levinas 2006a, p. 26), and the economy can be the context for deceit, corruption and greed (Levinas 2006a, p. 31; 1969, p. 229). However, in waking up once more to the unique dignity of every person, even through little acts of goodness (Levinas 1999, p. 107) we can all make our contribution to what Levinas calls a “superior form of economy” in which the *We* is constituted” (Levinas 2006a, pp. 32–33) and a society of selfish individualism is challenged. Levinas encourages us to aim higher in our vision of business and society by making sure that the personal face-to-face outlook is never far from our minds, so that our economic justice is not only fair, but loving, too.

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